

## Academic Fee Waivers

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) allows "outings conducted for non-commercial educational purposes by schools or *bona fide* academic institutions" to obtain a waiver of park entrance fees. A *bona fide* academic institution is one that is genuine and applies for the fee waiver "in good faith, without fraud or deceit." Commercial enterprises are not eligible for fee waivers, but school groups using a commercial vehicle for transportation *only* may apply for a fee waiver.

General guidelines for administering fee waivers and specific criteria for reviewing fee waiver requests are discussed below.

### 2.1 Criteria for Approving Requests for Academic Fee Waivers

Academic fee waivers are not granted automatically. Applicant groups must make application and meet the criteria to receive a fee waiver.

There are three criteria to qualify for an academic fee waiver:

1. **Eligibility**
2. **Educational purpose**
3. **Relevance of park resources or facilities.**

#### ***Eligibility***

National or international applicants must prove they are a school or *bona fide* academic institution by submitting one of the following types of documentation:

A statement confirming educational or scientific tax exemption from the IRS or the applicant's national, state, or local tax authority **OR**

A statement, from a bona fide academic institution meeting one of these eligibility standards, confirming that the group is visiting for the purpose of providing transferable academic credit based on a curriculum **OR**

A statement of accreditation or recognition as an educational institution from a legitimate international, national, regional, state, or local authority for the applicant's location.

#### ***Educational Purpose of the Visit***

Applicants must provide a written statement (documentation) verifying that the visit supports a specific curriculum for which academic credit is offered.

#### ***Relevance of Park Resources or Facilities***

Relevance to park resources must be described. Applicants must provide a written statement identifying the park resources and/or facilities that will be used to support the educational purpose of the visit, and how they are relevant to that purpose.

## 2.2 General Guidelines

Applicants must request a waiver in advance and in writing, and provide documentation to show how their request satisfies the academic fee waiver criteria.

A *bona fide* educational group that meets the academic fee waiver criteria but has hired commercial transportation (a tour bus, e.g.) should be granted a fee waiver.

The park retains the right to limit the number of chaperones, teachers, and guides as long as the limits are not in conflict with local or state regulations or the safety guidelines of the educational institution.

The decision to grant a fee waiver is the responsibility of the superintendent and may be delegated.

Academic fee waivers are not granted automatically; however, the superintendent may set forth procedures for handling on-the-spot fee waiver requests. This information must be addressed in the park-specific fee operations manual.

A fee waiver cannot be based on economic justifications, such as the educational group's limited finances or the cost of travel to the park from a distant location.

Groups such as leisure learning groups (Elderhostel, e.g.) and cultural exchange clubs must meet these same criteria to receive an academic fee waiver.

Service, civic, and fraternal organizations, such as scouts or 4-H, will usually not qualify for an academic fee waiver, but may qualify for another type of exemption or waiver. A permit may be required. For more information, refer to the exemptions section later in this chapter and/or Chapter 3, Fee Types and Authorities.

Non-profit status alone does not qualify a group for a fee waiver. For further guidance, contact your regional fee manager.

For auditing purposes, the park must retain a copy of each waiver request for three years.

As they are already exempt, bona fide educational groups of children less than 16 years of age do not need a fee waiver. (See the discussion about fee exemptions, below.) The park may require a waiver application to account for the free entry of adult chaperones and to manage park resources. A reasonable number of chaperones, drivers, and teachers should be admitted free as non-recreational entries.

### **Home Schools**

Home schools are accredited by individual states and have accreditation documentation. Check with your state's department of education to determine accreditation documentation in your state. Home schools may be granted fee waivers based on the course of study and submission of accreditation, following the procedures above. They may arrive as a group or individuals. The number of adult chaperones entering with a home school group may be similar to other school groups, or may have more adults since the parents are also the teachers.

### **Expanded Amenity Fees**

Under FLREA, academic fee waivers are granted only for entrance fees. Expanded amenity fees may be waived at the discretion of the superintendent.

## **2.3 Fee Waivers and Accreditation of Schools**

Accreditation is not required, but it is one of the three ways to prove eligibility for educational fee waivers.

Note that illegitimate "accreditation mills" exist and their numbers are increasing. To help prevent fraud, always verify that accreditation is *bona fide*.

Watch for three main discrepancies: 1) an accrediting organization that cannot be found online; 2) a waiver applicant that is not listed with the accrediting organization claimed; 3) a waiver applicant that claims that accreditation is pending. Also, do not be misled by these words: *chartered, licensed, registered, recognized, authorized, associated with, or approved by*. Groups may use these terms to suggest an affiliation with a state government or a local school system. These do not mean "accredited."

Rather than applying an inflexible requirement for an accreditation document, the NPS employee can ask the fee waiver applicant if the school is accredited. The NPS employee can then verify the accreditation online. Don't accept (or require) an internet address that ends in ".edu" as proof of eligibility. Since a rule change in 2001, the .edu suffix has only been granted to institutions of higher education; therefore elementary and secondary schools don't have ".edu" names. The U.S. Dept. of Education (ED) does not accredit schools, but does set standards for accrediting organizations. Verification of an accrediting organization's *bona fides* can be found on the ED's Accreditation page. Any organization listed there can be considered *bona fide*. Others should be carefully researched before accepting their legitimacy.